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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ARMENIAN PATRIARCH SEES URGENT NEED FOR
POLITICAL BREAKTHROUGH

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)
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Summary

11. (C) The Patriarch of the Armenian Orthodox Church in Lebanon, Catholicos Aram I, believes that Lebanon's political situation is so polarized between pro-government and opposition forces that unless some "bold initiative" is taken to change the current course of events, the outcome will be civil war. His bleak assessment was based on the lack of any viable internal initiative that would allow the political camps to come together and have a true political dialogue. He felt that the only solution that would bring the feuding parties together would be a new political agreement, a "Taif II," which would break the current deadlock and bring political consensus. This new agreement would require support from the U.S. and would also include countries like Iran and Syria to gain their cooperation in limiting support for Hizballah. He indicated that he was making efforts to bring religious leaders in Lebanon together for a conference to speak out against the country's civil unrest and to promote the "moral values" of understanding and peaceful coexistence as the path to national political reconciliation. He concluded by indicating that U.S. promotion of democratization in the Middle East, while an overall positive, must take into account the regional sensibilities that might lead to rejection of such principles. End Summary.

ARAM GIVES BLEAK POLITICAL OUTLOOK

12. (C) The Ambassador, visiting NEA/ELA Director Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley and Poloff called on Aram I Kichichian, the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia, on February 14. The Catholicos gave his bleak opinion on the political situation facing Lebanon and how the situation had become almost "irreversibly polarized," between pro-government forces and opposition forces. The ultimate result was producing "two separate Lebanons that are side-by-side, but not communicating face-to-face." The Patriarch emphasized his main concern was that unless a bold political breakthrough was not found soon, Lebanon would continue its inevitable drift towards civil war.

NO ONE WILLING
TO TAKE THE INITIATIVE

13. (C) The Patriarch shared candid thoughts on the political situation in Lebanon. He was concerned by the lack of any viable internal political initiative to solve the current political deadlock. He seemed most troubled by Lebanese political leaders, intransigent behavior, from all sides of the political spectrum, and their inability to recognize the dire situation of the country. No one has the political nerve to push an initiative to promote dialogue. He put the spotlight on Parliament Speaker, Nabih Berri, and his refusal to open Parliament and at least allow a forum for debate on pressing issues. While understanding the pressure that the Speaker faced from Shia opposition forces, plus Iran and Syria, he thought that it was indefensible for the Speaker not to "open shop" and hold a special session of Parliament. The Parliament is the &people's house, not his personal domain."

14. (C) The Patriarch did not spare criticism of the Christian community and its lack of unity, notably the division between the Michel Aoun and Samir Geagea camps. He emphasized that the Christian community, as a whole, had the most to lose politically if civil unrest continues. Current demographic developments do not favor the Christian community. The declining Christian population, with the increasing Shia population and its demand for more political power, meant that Christians must come together in Lebanon or be washed away by the "Shia tide." He thought it unwise for the Christians to be fighting among themselves, when only they stood to lose by such actions.

BEIRUT 00000265 002 OF 003

ARAM: A NEW "REALPOLITIK" IS REQUIRED

15. (C) The Catholicos explained how the political landscape in Lebanon had changed over the last two decades, especially in sectarian demographics. The sectarian make-up can no longer be seen in a simple Christian-Muslim prism. He explained that many Christians have left Lebanon, leaving the Sunni-Shia political struggle as the &main show.8 The recent media focus given to Christian infighting demonstrates that it has become the sideshow in Lebanese politics and the sooner the Christian community realizes this political reality the better. Thus any eventual Christian political compromise must take into account the growing Sunni-Shia factor.

POLITICAL SOLUTION: "TAIF II"

16. (C) The Catholicos reiterated his call for a new agreement to break the political deadlock, a "Taif II." Political problems facing Lebanon are too great simply to look to a national dialogue for a solution. A new political consensus had to be achieved to circumvent the current paralysis. The first step would be to elect a new President. After the election, a process to organize a Taif II agreement would begin.

17. (C) The Ambassador asked why the Shia would agree to any new agreement, when they have questions about the divisions set out in the original Taif Agreement. While clearly uncomfortable with re-opening the Muslim-Christian divisions set out in the Taif agreement, Aram responded that a new Taif would have to take into consideration the new sectarian realities on the ground. It is no secret that the Shia population has grown in numbers and strength and is demanding more political power. They have &proven their power8 by causing a war with Israel and have produced political gridlock by pulling their ministers from the cabinet.

¶8. (C) The Ambassador questioned how any new confessional agreement would play with the Christian community, especially with Michel Aoun and his supporters. Aram admitted that it would be a hard sell, but given the alternatives of endless civil strife, eventually most Christians would have to come to terms with the political reality of increased Shia participation in the government. As for Aoun,s view on such an agreement, Aram jokingly said "we know what he wants" (referring to Aoun,s ambition to become the next President).

He summarized that after Aoun joined up with Hizballah in opposition, it is hard to tell whether Aoun really cares about promoting Christian community issues in government at all. Aoun,s main focus is on becoming president and to read any more into his motives would be pure speculation.

¶9. (C) The Patriarch also believed that part of this new agreement would be the opportunity to &de-politicize8 the Special Tribunal to try suspects for the Rafiq Hariri assassination. This would remove the Tribunal from the heated political scene and allow it to proceed forward without dealing with the constant political wrangling that has delayed its official ratification.

IRAN IS KEY TO INFLUENCING
HIZBALLAH

¶10. (C) The Catholicos, as part of his "realpolitik" outlook, advocated that Iran needs to be brought into the process of finding a political solution in Lebanon. He stated that the Lebanese have failed to find their own political solution and the current political standoff could not be solved by the Lebanese themselves. He stated that achieving political peace in Lebanon is not just an internal problem. Iran held the true keys to peace in Lebanon. Disarming Hizballah is essential to any peaceful outcome in Lebanon. To pressure Hizballah, you need to bring Iran on board to cut the flow of funding and arms to its militants.

SAUDI-IRANIAN INITIATIVE

BEIRUT 00000265 003 OF 003

¶11. (C) Aram related a recent discussion with the Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon, Mohammad Reza Sheibani, in which he indicated that Iran was maintaining constant contact with its Saudi counterparts about working out political compromise. He felt that the recent talks between Saudi National Security Council official Bandar bin Sultan and Iranian Security negotiator Ali Larijani had brought the two countries together to end the crisis in Lebanon. The talks have given some hope of providing a possible political solution. While the Ambassador indicated that the U.S. government is not in a position to veto the Saudi-Iranian channel, it must be seen in a larger perspective of other regional issues like Iran's nuclear enrichment program and its support of Hizballah. The Patriarch understood this caveat and that the Iranian channel would have to be &narrow8 and address nothing more than ending the political unrest in Lebanon.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS UNITED USING THE PULPIT

¶12. (C) The Ambassador inquired whether the Patriarch could participate in gathering together the religious clerics from all denominations in Lebanon and produce a united communique to "shame" the political leaders into accepting a political compromise. The united clerics' statement during the July Hizballah-Israel war was important in building support for PM Siniora's 7-point plan, including regarding the goal of having the GOL enjoy a monopoly of weapons. The Patriarch indicated that he has made several efforts to invite clerics together from different religious groups to hold a public conference to speak out against the country's civil unrest and to promote peaceful coexistence as the path to national

political reconciliation. Some of the clerics, which Aram did not name, were hesitant to participate in such a gathering. He felt that the sectarian splits that are present in politics also can be seen in the religious communities. These divisions make it hard to reach an agreement among the clerics and to present a united front in promoting political reconciliation.

U.S. AS FACILITATOR

¶13. (C) The Patriarch concluded by indicating that U.S. promotion of democratization in the Middle East, while an overall positive, must be tempered to take into account the regional sensibilities that might lead to rejection of such principles. The region is facing a period of change and many countries, like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, are trying to adapt to the new political environment. These countries see Lebanon with its more "open" political system and the crisis that has evolved, and are wondering how far can they go in political reform before suffering the same fate. He stated the U.S. is the only nation that is powerful enough to "facilitate" the regional political compromise required for peace, but it must have the insight not to press its "nationalistic" views upon a region which has been historically suspicious of outside powers.

FELTMAN